Passionate Intensity: Political Blogs and the American Journalistic Tradition

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This study attempts to find out the reasons for the emergence of blogging in the contemporary media scene and for its widespread acceptance. First, it delineates the various events that contributed to the notoriety of political blogs. In a second stage, it traces the origins of contemporary blogging back to the history of early journalistic forms, from the penny press to the muckraking movement. After identifying the characteristics linking blogs to the American journalistic tradition, it focusses on what differentiates blogging from other forms of journalistic writing.

When the software enabling blogs first became widely accessible to a large public, in 1995, the new format seemed to run counter to every tenet of the professional codes of conduct of journalism: fact-checking, accuracy, neutrality and a commitment to presenting a balanced point of view.[1] The ability for anyone to publish without the safeguards of editorial fact-checking or the restraints of an editorial line appeared to preclude anything but the most idiosyncratic utterances.[2] Accordingly, the new blog format was thought to be the ideal setting for personal journals or logs, but would hardly have its place among the institutions that make up the press. Yet in the span of just

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[1] Gaye Tuchman, *Making the News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 211; Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 182; Mark Fishman, "News and Non-events: Making the Visible Invisible," in James Ettema and D. Charles Whitney, eds., *Individuals in Mass Media Organizations: Creativity and Constraint* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1982), 219–40, 220; Pamela J. Shoemaker, Martin Eichholz, Eunyi Kim and Brenda Wrigley, "Individual and Routine Forces in Gatekeeping," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 78, 2 (2001), 233–46, 233–34; Eileen Gilligan, "A Re-examination of Reporters' Norms and the Routines Used to Maintain Them," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Dresden International Congress Centre, Dresden, Germany, 16 June 2006, available at http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p93196_index.html.

[2] Michael Skube, "All the Noise that Fits," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 Aug. 2007.

a few years, blogs have become a ubiquitous feature of online media. As American newspapers and magazines developed online versions of their traditional dailies or weeklies, blogs were inserted alongside more time-honored forms, such as articles and editorials, in a movement so sweeping as to leave no newspaper untouched.

What mechanisms account for such widespread adoption of blogs and for their newfound cultural legitimacy? The present paper proposes to examine the reasons why political blogs have been coopted by journalists and by the public at large, by first chronicling the ascent of blogs and then by attempting to find out how blogging relates to past journalistic practices in the United States.

I. THE RISE OF BLOGS IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Blogs became prominent in the American political landscape through a series of landmark events. The first instance is generally thought to have occurred in 2002, when Trent Lott, then majority leader at the Senate, attended a reception for South Carolina senator Strom Thurmond. Lott said he had voted for Thurmond during his bid for the presidency of the United States in 1948, and generally expressed his enthusiasm for his long political career, without ever hinting at Thurmond's segregationist past.[3] After several bloggers gave the story notoriety, the mainstream media took it up, compelling Lott to apologize and resign from his majority-leader post.

After this initial occurrence, blogging came once more to the fore in the summer of 2003, though not through the uncovering of a scandal, but with Howard Dean's campaign for the Democratic nomination. Dean's reliance on bloggers to organize his campaign, to draw in a new kind of beginner political activist, and to raise funds elicited a great deal of media attention. The number of political commentary blogs rose steeply and gained a considerable audience throughout the presidential campaign. Even though Dean eventually lost out to John Kerry, blogs had gained a foothold in the American public sphere.[4] Then, during the so-called "invisible

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[3] Daniel Perlmutter and Misti McDaniel, "The Ascent of Blogging," *Nieman Reports*, (Fall 2005), n.p.

[4] Andrew Kohut and Caroll Doherty, "Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe." Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2004, n.p., available at http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/200.pdf. Andrew Chadwick, *Internet Politics: States, Citizens and New Communication Technologies* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 145; Kirsten A. Foot and Steven M. Schneider, *Web Campaigning* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 198; Viviane Serfaty, "Les blogs et leurs usages

primaries" – that is, the run-up to the 2008 primaries and presidential election that started roughly in early 2006 – all the early contenders, be they Democrats or Republicans, embraced blogging along with more traditional forms of political communication, thus establishing the viability of blogs.[5]

The visibility of blogs also increased in a different, though related, area of the political sphere. In September 2004, during the presidential campaign, CBS journalist Dan Rather presented documents purporting to show that George Bush had disobeyed orders while serving in the National Guard, but that, thanks to his father's influence, all evidence of this misconduct had disappeared from his record. Immediately after the *60 Minutes II* program was broadcast, the authenticity of the documents was challenged by a conservative blogger and former Air Force officer.[6] Thanks to the expertise of several bloggers who compared fonts and confirmed the suspicion of forgery, this news quickly spread all over the blogosphere.[7] On the following day it was picked up by the mainstream media. Less than two weeks later, Dan Rather publicly declared that he could not guarantee the authenticity of the documents and resigned, illustrating the fact that political blogs now had the power to interact with more traditional journalistic discourse.

The pattern set by the Dan Rather case was repeated in 2006, during the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel. Charles Johnson, the author of a conservative blog called *Little Green Footballs* (LGF), identified pictures that had been doctored in one case and stage-managed in others. This had been done by a freelance Lebanese photographer, who had tampered with his own snapshots to make them more vivid.[8] Charles Johnson wrote, "This Reuters photograph shows blatant evidence of manipulation. Notice the repeating patterns in the smoke; this is almost certainly caused by using the photoshop [*sic*] 'clone' tool to add smoke to the image."[9] Other bloggers took up the

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politiques lors de la campagne présidentielle de 2004 aux Etats Unis," *Mots: les langages du politique*, 80 (March 2006), 25–35, 34.

[5] Daniel Perlmutter, *Blog Wars* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 85; Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 47; Serfaty, 371.

[6] *Free Republic*, "We need to see those memos again," 9 Sept. 2004, available at http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1210516/posts?q=1&&page=101#107.

[7] Jay Rosen, "The Journalism that Bloggers Actually Do," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 Aug. 2007; Arthur S. Hayes, *Press Critics Are the Fifth Estate: Media Watchdogs in America* (Westport, Ct: Praeger, 2008), 36; Perlmutter, 90–93.

[8] Jeff Jarvis, "Making War Look Worse," *The Guardian*, 7 Aug. 2006.

[9] Charles Johnson, *Little Green Footballs*, "Reuters Doctoring Photos from Beirut?" 5 Aug. 2006, available at http://littlegreenfootballs.com/article/21956; *idem*, "Fauxtography," Aug. 2006, available at http://littlegreenfootballs.com/article/22391_Fauxtography_Updates.

story and were followed by television on the very same day. A week later, Reuters issued a communiqué to apologize for the manipulation and eliminated from its database nine hundred and twenty pictures produced by the photographer.

In 2009, another blogger with the online magazine *Salon*, Glenn Greenwald, pointed out that Richard Wolffe, a frequent political news analyst on MSNBC and NBC News, was employed by a business consulting firm whose customers had vested interests in most of the issues covered by the networks. After the denunciation of this conflict of interest, Wolffe stepped down as a contributor to these two channels, although no public announcement of the reasons for his departure was ever made.[10]

These instances are but a few among many others.[11] The pattern emerging from them is that of a blogger identifying a sensitive item of news which is then taken up by traditional media acting as relays and widely disseminating it. This repetitive pattern indicates that blogs seem to have reached the critical mass thanks to which they can contribute to setting the political agenda alongside more traditional actors, such as the mainstream media, politicians or government officials.

Indeed, not only is the number of blogs growing, but their audience is reaching critical mass too. By the end of the first quarter of 2009, the penetration rate of the Internet in North America had reached 74.4 percent of the entire population.[12] The latest available figures on media audiences show that 37 percent of all Americans use the Internet, blogs included, as their main source of news.[13] With an adult population numbering roughly two hundred and thirty million out of an estimated three hundred and four million inhabitants in 2008, according to the figures provided by the US Census Bureau in 2009, the potential audience for political blogs might therefore amount to more than 62 million Americans.

The increasing solidity of the link between blogging and politics is confirmed by audience ratings; the top ten political blogs get between forty-five thousand visitors (for *Wonkette, the D.C. Gossip*) to over nine hundred and nineteen thousand visitors per day (for *The Daily Kos*) – figures that cannot

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[10] Glenn Greenwald, "GE's Silencing of Olbermann and MSNBC's Sleazy Use of Richard Wolffe," *Salon.com*, 1 Aug. 2009, n.p.   [11] Rosen; Hayes, 47–51.
[12] Internet World Stats, 31 March 2009, available at http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm.
[13] Andrew Kohut and Caroll Doherty, "Audience Segments in a Changing News Environment." Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2008, available at http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/444.pdf – http://people-press.org/report/444/news-media.

compare with the much higher audience ratings of television, but that cannot be dismissed either.[14] Another source ranking the top twenty political blogs in the United States in September 2008, right before the presidential election, found that the *Huffington Post* ranked first, with four and a half million unique visitors per month, with the cumulative audience of these twenty blogs nearing the 190 million mark.[15]

With such audiences, the best-known blogs can therefore focus attention onto under-reported or misreported news, forcing newspapers and television to take the blogosphere into account. In so doing, they are simultaneously competing with mainstream media and heavily relying on their superior audience. It is indeed essential to point out that bloggers require the echo chamber of the mainstream media – newspapers and television, including cable – to contribute to their agenda-setting function and to challenge it at the same time. This apparent paradox can, however, be explained and solved: political blogs can be concurrently allied with and antagonistic to the mainstream media because they are directly linked to the American journalistic tradition.

Indeed, blogs can only gain a foothold in today's media environment inasmuch as they connect with pre-existing journalistic practices. Blogs are embedded in a network of symbolic representations of journalism; they do not gain significance because they are brand new or because of readership figures only, but precisely because they are grounded in the history of journalism, because they rely on past journalistic practices and because they claim to comply with the public's expectations of an ideal type of journalism, purportedly closer to the field and exempt from any distortion. The success of political blogging in the United States can be explained by its links with the American journalistic tradition, which I now propose to explore.

II. LINKS WITH THE AMERICAN JOURNALISTIC TRADITION

A gift economy

The first reason why political blogs are beginning to throw their weight around is their very low cost of entry. Blogs can be created in minutes and

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[14] *Site Meter*, n.p. Figures quoted in *The Truth Laid Bear* [*sic*], July 2009, available at http://truthlaidbear.com/ecotraffic.php.

[15] *Comscore, Inc.*, "Huffington Post and Politico Lead Wave of Explosive Growth at Independent Political Blogs and News Sites this Election Season," press release, 22 Oct. 2008, available at http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Press_Releases/2008/10/Huffington_Post_and_Politico_Lead_Political_Blogs/(language)/eng-US. See also http://www.huffingtonpost.com.

have low maintenance costs, typically not much more than a computer and an Internet connection. The printing and distributing costs of traditional papers do not apply to blogs, nor do the costs entailed by employing reporters, fact-checkers and journalists, since bloggers, when starting their activity, write pro bono. Bloggers contribute their own writing and their time without remuneration, their main incentive being, at least at first, the creation of notoriety for themselves. Although some of them – more particularly multi-authored blogs such as *Boing Boing* – may thus be priming the pump for a stream of revenue through advertising, a vast number of bloggers write on a voluntary basis and without any expectation of monetary gain.

The current situation of blogs recalls the economic context in which journalists wrote at the end of the nineteenth century: the invention of the linotype then drastically reduced the cost of producing a paper or a magazine, and advertising supplied complementary funding, so that dailies and weekly or monthly journals could be sold at rock-bottom prices. This was the time when the circulation of dailies and of magazines ran into the millions.[16]

Readers of the so-called penny press had to pay a tiny amount to purchase their newspaper, while blog readers are given free access to content. Yet the two models are similar inasmuch as the product price is not central to their operation. Blogs have in fact moved one step further than their historical model, because they function within a gift economy. In such a system, readers are not even required to pay a nominal fee to gain access to the material on offer, while bloggers are funded by advertising, or supported by reader donations. Blogging operates within a gift economy based on social relationships and the creation of social capital.[17]

Since the inception of the Internet, a gift economy has been the underlying principle of the development of protocols and software.[18] Beyond the open-source software movement, the gift economy keeps on informing a large number of online transactions, up to and including the social transactions between writers and readers of political blogs. Just like the penny that was not much more than a symbolic payment for a thick newspaper and led to the creation of vast readerships, free online content offers bloggers a decisive advantage, conducive to larger audiences. The traditional print press

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[16] Frédéric Barbier and Catherine Bertho-Lavenir, *Histoire des médias, de Diderot à Internet* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1996), 129.

[17] David. J. Cheal, *The Gift Economy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 40.

[18] Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben, *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* (Los Alamitos, CA: IEEE Computer Society Press, 1997), 133; Viviane Serfaty, "L'Internet: fragments d'un discours utopique," *Communication & Langages*, 119 (Jan.–March 1999), 106–17, 112–14.

has had to align itself and now provides free access to its online material, again showing the weight of past practices and representations in the shaping of the present.

Discursive practices

The second reason why political blogs are gathering steam is that they have gained a wider audience thanks to the specific features of their discursive practices which stand in stark contrast with those of more traditional media.

Mainstream electronic media, such as radio and television, are required by Section 315 of the 1934 Communications Act to provide equal air time to politicians of all parties when they run for office. As a result of this legal obligation, even drastically opposed views appear to be on the same footing. The juxtaposition of antagonistic viewpoints almost mechanically blunts their respective strength, thus somewhat downplaying their conflicting meanings through their mere spatial proximity.

In fields other than politics, traditional news reporting also strives to provide balanced, fair points of view on issues, and to remain nonpartisan, even if only superficially so. In part this can be put down to economics. The media are owned by large conglomerates that insist on a profitability-oriented model, chiefly based on advertising contracts that condition the existence of both print and electronic media. It therefore becomes important to adhere to a nonpartisan attitude and, as a result, to euphemize conflicts and debates, so as not to antagonize sponsors.[19] Therefore if news organizations cannot afford to offend either their owners or the potential buyers of advertising space, the ideal of nonpartisan reporting is at least partly rooted in economic realities.

However, the prevalence of balanced views in news reports should not be ascribed to legal or financial considerations alone; it is also due to long-term historical trends. Modern journalism arose in opposition to both partisan and sensational journalism and promoted objectivity and attention to facts.[20] Made wary of impassioned reporting by the propaganda and manipulation of the 1898 Spanish–American war, a movement away from personal or corporate bias in reporting took hold. Journalists won legitimacy for their profession by carefully constructing a code of conduct

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[19] Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 4.

[20] Michael Schudson, "The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism," *Journalism*, 2 (2001), 149–70, 149; John C. Hartsock, *A History of American Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 52–56.

resting on the twin pillars of truthfulness and fairness, with the fairness doctrine being prevalent in broadcast media from 1949 to 1987.[21] Factual presentation of news became the standard, with op-eds and, to a lesser extent, readers' letters, offering the only possibility of strongly expressed beliefs.

One of the results is that modern journalism tends towards a unifying function, as opposed to a divisive one, with journalists being the mouthpieces of their audience.[22] From this viewpoint, if journalists are an emanation of the public, then the expression of contentiousness has to be regulated by social constraints at large as well as by the norms and standards of journalistic practices. In a society where the display and expression of emotion in public are circumscribed, journalists have to show restraint in their news presentation. Even if they hold strong political opinions, twentieth- and twenty-first-century journalists working in the mainstream media have a social and professional obligation to suppress them and to provide balanced coverage of every issue.

However, alongside mainstream papers, radio and television, strongly partisan voices have always been present in the American media environment, from the Communist *Daily Worker* in the 1930s to the right-wing Fox News Channel today, providing dissent to the consensual journalism prevailing at large.[23] Political blogs pick up the tradition of the minority dissenting voice and thrive on intense political emotions and engagement. The purposefully blunt and sometimes colloquially expressed views of their authors reinject into the public sphere a dimension of contention which is carefully elided from the mainstream media, or which is expressed through strictly regulated, formal political debates. The most-read blogs across the political spectrum demonstrate a clear-cut polarization of their respective stance, and political bloggers root their commentaries in deep convictions, with posts designed to arouse the political emotions of their readers and to designate clearly friends and foes. Bloggers such as Michelle Malkin of the eponymous Conservative blog or Markos Moulitsas of the Democratic-leaning *Daily Kos* seek to set themselves apart from journalists, who are duty-bound to remain neutral, by openly stating their political commitments and freely expressing their political emotions, providing a

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[21] Marc-François Bernier, *Ethique et déontologie du journalisme* (Ste Foy: Presses de l'Université de Laval, 1994), 119.

[22] Géraldine Muhlmann, *A Political History of Journalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 133.

[23] Daniel Royot and Susan Ruel, *Médias, sociétés et culture aux Etats-Unis* (Paris: Ophrys-Ploton, 1996), 51–52.

clear instance of the passion that can infuse politics.[24] Political blogs are above all predicated on their partisan vision of current events and their authors hope to maintain an ongoing ideological confrontation with their opponents while creating a bond of emotional closeness with their audience. The commitment of bloggers to their political beliefs is what turns them into "the binding instance … [that] guarantee[s] news value [and] is essential to create the real interactivity that is necessary for the creation of meaning."[25]

This "passionate intensity," to borrow a phrase from W. B. Yeats, is another instance of what links bloggers to the American journalistic tradition, and more specifically to the muckraking movement of the early twentieth century. Like the bloggers today, the muckrakers "ranged from conservative to radical, capturing the ideological diversity [of] … the early years of the American century."[26] The muckrakers engaged in investigative journalism, writing articles that were serialized in popular magazines such as, first, *McClure's*, followed by *Everybody's*, *Collier's* and *The Arena* and that were subsequently published in book form.[27] In his introduction to the *Shame of the Cities*, Lincoln Steffens described his purpose as follows:

This is all very unscientific, but then, I am not a scientist. I am a journalist. I did not gather with indifference all the facts and arrange them patiently for permanent preservation and laboratory analysis. I did not want to preserve, I wanted to destroy the facts. My purpose was no more scientific than the spirit of my investigation and reports; it was … to see if the shameful facts, spread out in all their shame, would not burn through our civic shamelessness and set fire to American pride. That was the journalism of it. I wanted to move and to convince.[28]

Like other muckrakers – Ida Tarbell, Ray Stannard Baker or Upton Sinclair – Lincoln Steffens set out not merely to report on, but also to reform, the reality he was investigating. He gave up any pretence towards objectivity and became an active participant in social reform. As explicitly stated in the above excerpt, Steffens was personally committed to ending the corruption of political machines, and to do so he transformed journalism

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[24] Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper and Francesca A. Polletta, eds., *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 22. Michelle Malkin's political blog is available at http://michellemalkin.com.

[25] Hilde Van Belle, "The Rhetorical Power of Direct News Access," in Lotte Dam, Lise-Lotte Holmgreen and Jeanne Strunck, eds., *Rhetorical Aspects of Discourses in Present-Day Society*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 249–67, 264.

[26] Robert Miraldi, *The Muckrakers: Evangelical Crusaders* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 93.

[27] Harry Hartwick, *The Foreground of American Fiction* (New York: American Book Company, 1934), 231.

[28] Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities* (New York: McClure, Philips & Co., 1904), 17–18.

into a "literature of exposure."[29] He used the powerful rhetorical tool of denunciation to create a movement of public opinion based on moral outrage that would carry out the reforms he advocated. Denunciation was also instrumental in shaming officials into compliance with the new codes of conduct. Lincoln Steffens thus can be said to have contributed to the construction of the new role that the muckraking movement ascribed to journalists: investigation became only the initial stage of the journalist's job, and had to be followed up by a course of action aimed at reform and improvement. In this way, Steffens, Tarbell, Baker or Sinclair invented a new role for journalists, midway between reportage and activism; in this way, they managed to achieve social and political results that would have been unattainable for ordinary political activists. Whenever bloggers pinpoint the faux pas of the mainstream media and manage to push established news organizations towards reform, they are following in the footsteps of the muckrakers and using passionate political rhetoric to blur the line between reporting and activism.

Embracing the position of the outsider

Muckrakers and bloggers share another characteristic: contempt for established journalism. Bloggers claim that journalists wrongfully monopolize news gathering, and they challenge both the expertise and the mediation of professional journalists.[30] Political blogs seem to have given themselves the mission of fastidiously monitoring the mainstream media and identifying errors, omissions or incorrect sources.[31] In so doing, they position themselves as counterexperts in news gathering and attack the entrenched positions of the mainstream media.

In addition, political bloggers reclassify, as "news" or newsworthy, items that might otherwise have been overlooked or even dismissed as unimportant. For instance, by being able to detect inaccuracies or outright fraud, they draw attention to blogging as being in and of itself newsworthy. In this way,

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[29] Cornelius C. Regier, *The Era of the Muckrakers* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1932), 194; Michael Emery and Edwin Emery, *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992), 223.

[30] Nicolas Pélissier, "La plume dans la toile: l'identité des journalistes à l'épreuve des réseaux numériques," *Médiamorphoses*, 4 (2002), 45–51; Wilson Lowrey and William Anderson, "The Journalist behind the Curtain: Participatory Functions on the Internet and Their Impact on Perceptions of the Work of Journalism," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10, 3 (2005), n.p.

[31] Stephen D. Cooper, *Watching the Watchdog: Bloggers as the Fifth Estate* (Spokane, WA: Marquette Books, 2006, 18.

bloggers contribute to challenging the authority and legitimacy of mainstream media. Despite repeated denials, there exists a competitive relationship between blogs and traditional media. Bloggers use the combined strategies of attack and defence to gain a foothold in the public sphere; they lead the offensive by criticizing the discourse patterns of the mainstream media, while their defensive strategy relies on upholding the relevance and importance of their own approach to current events, so as to ward off dismissive or discounting assessments of their activity.

This distrust of established media can also be said to hark back to the muckrakers. In his Preface to *The Story of the Brass Check*, Upton Sinclair writes,

The first half of this book tells a personal story: the story of one man's experiences with American journalism … Look! Here is American Journalism! Here is what it did to one man, systematically, persistently, deliberately, for a period of twenty years … When you have read this story, you will know our Journalism; you will know the body and soul of it, you will know it in such a way that you will not have to be told what it is doing to the movement for industrial freedom and self-government all over the world.[32]

In this passage, Upton Sinclair alludes to the social responsibility of the journalist and to his role as a mediator in public life. When denouncing "our journalism," Sinclair hints at the high moral standards the profession should strive to live by. These attacks on the debased state of journalism point to an idealistic conception of the "high seriousness," to borrow Matthew Arnold's phrase, that the press should be imbued with. Also, by holding journalism up to the highest standard, Sinclair positions himself outside the profession as a socially recognized group, while still purporting to be a journalist himself. This is a peculiarly productive position, because it simultaneously enables participation and criticism, insider knowledge and critical distance.

The similar positions of critical insider/outsider adopted by the muckrakers in their time and the bloggers today show that these are strategies characteristic of emerging movements.[33] The most famous bloggers – Ariana Huffington, John Hinderaker, Markos Moulitsas, to name but a few – might easily have written their way to fame via traditional media and become insiders. However, like the muckrakers before them, bloggers have chosen to criticize mainstream media and its mode of production of newsworthy material, while fighting to impose new standards and new categories of

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[32] Upton Sinclair, Preface, in *idem*, *The Brass Check: A Story of American Journalism* (Pasadena: self-published, 1919; rpt. New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1970, n.p., available at http://www.teleread.org/brasscheck.htm.

[33] Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), 411.

perception for what is newsworthy or not, what is correct practice or not. Their fight is effective because they are knowledgeable outsiders; as such, they introduce difference and thus contribute to the emergence of a new format.

Hybridization

The final characteristic muckrakers and bloggers can be said to share is an embrace of hybridization in stylistic codes. For the muckrakers, this meant defining themselves in relation to literature. Indeed, journalism and literature had long been closely intertwined, with numerous novels being serialized in newspapers, on the one hand, and, on the other, no clear-cut distinction between reporting and literary writing.[34] However, the nineteenth century was marked by the construction of literature as autonomous.[35] It achieved this elevated status with the rise of the novel and its claim to high seriousness, from the era of realism to that of naturalism, with their attendant twentieth-century developments – aesthetic modernism and New Criticism.[36] For these schools of fiction and of criticism, the work of art could refer to nothing outside itself. Art had to be self-referential. Art for art's sake was the ideal artists had to strive to attain, and it conditioned the legitimacy of artists. Political commitment thus could have no place in a work of art, and the political concerns of journalists placed them squarely outside the realm of literature. This was when journalism "fell from literary grace" and was looked down on as a lowlier form of writing.[37]

While high literature acquired legitimacy in the nineteenth century, journalists strove at the same time to achieve recognition and autonomy by eschewing the sensationalism of the penny press and embracing a set of rigorous professional rules. The muckrakers went one step further as they were part of a movement using the frame of reference of naturalism to infuse news gathering and journalistic writing with the depth and range of literature. Through the use of the codes of naturalistic fiction, Upton Sinclair and other muckrakers appropriated part of the cultural legitimacy of the novel and of the artist. They made it harder to look down on journalism by turning it into a form which now came with unmistakably literary attributes. Indeed, hybridization rests on a rationale of interpenetration which blurs the boundaries between distinct forms.[38] By making it difficult to distinguish between

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[34] Van Belle, 252.   [35] Bourdieu, 76.
[36] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 351; Hartsock, *History of American Journalism*, 244.   [37] Hartsock, 244.
[38] Annick Collovald and Erik Neveu, *Lire le noir* (Paris: Bibliothèque publique d'information/ Centre Pompidou, 2004), 84–85.

forms, hybridization functions as a modifier of legitimacy. Adopting some of the literary codes of naturalistic fiction was a way for the muckrakers to gain – by association, as it were – some of the consideration shown to serious novelists.

Hybridization, however, works both ways.[39] The novel, in its turn, appropriated some of the characteristics of journalism. This is how the category of the nonfiction novel came to be, despite the oxymoron contained in its very name. Today's television documentaries merge excerpts from archived newsreels with fictional scenes, in a dramatic illustration of the repercussions of hybridization. As to the print media, they now all have an electronic version as well as blogs that are published on a regular basis. Blogs themselves, with their painstaking attention to detail and their search for accuracy, are clearly trying to emulate the mainstream media and their credibility. Blogs have also developed a style that stands halfway between the pamphlet and the conversational mode. Blogs borrow from the journalistic genres and from the new forms of writing on the Net, print media are now borrowing from bloggers, in a continuous process of diversification through hybridization.

III. CONCLUSION

Through the four characteristics described above, then, contemporary blogging can be said to be a throwback to earlier journalistic practices, and as such it can be seen as firmly entrenched in the American journalistic tradition. Does that mean that blogging is nothing more than yet another avatar of journalism, devoid of any kind of novelty? In fact, blogs do possess true originality, residing above all in the inclusion of reader comments after each post.

Reader comments may be "moderated" by an administrator or by an application automatically checking for certain words which, if found, might result in the comment being deleted. Reader comments therefore are mediated and regulated discourse, as befits a political context, rather than untrammelled free speech. Despite that measure of control, most reader postings to blogs include not only approving or laudatory statements, but bluntly contentious ones. Conflict is in fact one of the essential characteristics of reader comments, and this has important repercussions.

Indeed, the simultaneous presence of starkly opposed opinions in reader comments means that blogs embed the discourse of opponents and critics

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[39] Ibid., 87.

within the discourse of the author. This copresence leads to fecund debates between bloggers and their readers, as well as between readers themselves, all of which turn blogs into dialogical spaces, jointly produced by the author and the audience.

This dialogical space is enabled by an original use of written language. Bloggers and their readers employ the hybrid discursive mode first initiated in early newsgroups and email communications and further honed with Web 2.0 applications such as Facebook or Twitter. This discursive mode mixes the characteristics of speech with those of writing, resulting in what I have proposed calling "oralized writing."[40] Oralized writing forms the basis of "a culture of ritualised conflict," referring to a set of regulations framing contentious exchanges and enabling communication even among sworn enemies.[41] This organization of discourse manages to convey the subjectivity of participants, showing how political and social issues are invested by citizens to create meaning.

These reader comments and reader-initiated political debates might easily be dismissed as so much cheap talk, since they seem to involve nothing more than writing a few lines of text and sending them off online. Despite appearances, however, reader comments on political blogs offer an invaluable platform enabling "participants to have a chance to shape through language the aspect of the world under discussion."[42] Bloggers provide their readers with an alternative locus for news, an alternative style, and an alternative arena for political conversations. At a time when the media are characterized by their concentration and by cross-ownership by an ever-smaller number of giant conglomerates, blogs introduce a nonconsensual, hybrid form of political debate. This is how they can be said to be heirs to Sinclair, Steffens, Tarbell and Baker, even while contributing to the in-depth transformation of contemporary American journalism. Political blogs are one of the signs of a continual dialogue between past and present journalistic practices, showing that tradition is in fact a dynamic, evolving concept.

[40] Viviane Serfaty, *The Mirror and the Veil: An Overview of American Online Diaries and Blogs* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004), 66.
[41] Viviane Serfaty, "Forms and Functions of Conflict in Online Communities," *Cercles*, 5 (2002), 183–97, 187.
[42] S. Gilpin, "Analyzing Everyday Talk about Social Issues," in Barbara Johnstone and Christopher Eisenhart, eds., *Rhetoric in Detail: Discourse Analyses of Rhetorical Talk and Text* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamin's Publishing Company, 2008), 307–25, 317.